

Thanksgiving

By Dr. George O. Wood

There's a wonderful old Gospel song that says:

Count your blessings, name them one by one.

Count your blessings, see what God has done.

Count your blessings, name them one by one;

And, it will surprise you what the Lord has done!

That's what we do at this Thanksgiving Season – we count our blessings! And they are many!

The early Pilgrims left Plymouth, England, on September 6, 1620, bound for the new world. With winter approaching it was probably not the best time to set sail. For the next two months, the 102 passengers fought the stormy winds and high seas of the Atlantic Ocean until the cry of "Land!" was heard.

They arrived in what we now know as Massachusetts and before disembarking signed the Mayflower Compact on December 11 – America's first document of civil government and self-government.

They hastily built shelters, but were unprepared for the harsh winter. Nearly half of them died of disease and starvation before Spring. One year after arriving, on December 13, 1621, the remaining grateful Pilgrims declared a three day feast to thank God and celebrate with their new found Indian friends. This celebration followed their first harvest in the New Land.

Over a century and a half later, our first president, George Washington, issued a proclamation in 1789 calling for America to celebrate its first Day of Thanksgiving to God under the new constitution. For the next seventy-four years, Thanksgiving celebrations were set by state governments. Thanksgiving became a national day in the midst of the Civil War. The Battle of Gettysburg took place in July of 1863, resulting in the death of 60,000 American lives. Four months later, President Abraham Lincoln issued a proclamation that established a National Thanksgiving Day.

In the ensuing years, in good times and in bad, Americans have celebrated our unique holiday – a time when we give thanks to God.

As Christians, it is important for us to focus on what we all can give thanks for. Some will gather around Thanksgiving dinner tables this year and their cup will be full – good health, an intact family, a new baby welcomed, a marriage begun, a long sought goal achieved.

But, for others, it will be a different story – a member of the family will be absent around the table this year – perhaps through death, divorce, distance, or estrangement. Perhaps a job was lost, or there was a financial setback, a home lost through repossession, a frightening medical diagnosis.

I am reminded of a story about Dr. Alexander Whyte, the great Scottish preacher. He was known for his profound pastoral prayers – which were marked by expressions of thanksgiving to God. One bitter cold winter morning in Edinburgh, in the midst of a hard driving rain, the two deacons who opened the church doors were talking to one another. The one said, “I don’t suppose Dr. Whyte will have anything to give thanks for on a morning like this.” But, when Dr. Whyte took the pulpit, his prayer began with these words, “O God, we thank you that it is not always like this!”

Dr. Whyte’s example teaches that we can always find something to be grateful for!

My pastoral concern is this –what can EVERY ONE of us give thanks for – whether we are in the best of times or the worst of times? And, what unites Christians in Thanksgiving in every place – whether we are in our wonderful land, the United States of America, or a follower of Jesus in North Korea, Zimbabwe, Iran, Cuba, or the Sudan?

Here is where we must distinguish the temporal from the eternal.

Yes, we do give thanks for the temporal – for the blessings of liberty, for good shelter and food, for family and health. But, we also recognize that many live without those blessings.

So, let’s make sure at this Thanksgiving that we put on the eyeglasses of our Christian Faith and thank God for all the blessings which are not measured by this world’s values.

Writing from a prison cell, with no Thanksgiving turkey on his plate, the Apostle Paul tells us: “I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.” What’s the secret to such an attitude?” Paul tells us: “Rejoice in the Lord always, I will say it again: Rejoice! . . . Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:12, 4-7).

No matter our circumstance, we give thanks that God loves us so much He sent Jesus to save us from our sins. We are grateful for God’s forgiveness, for the gift of eternal life, for a home that is being prepared for us in heaven. We thank Him for fellow believers, for the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives, for godly men and women who have influenced us to live rightly, for God’s word that is a lamp to our feet and a light for our steps. Oh, there are so many ways to count our blessings!

The Apostle Paul felt such gratitude for Jesus that when he couldn't find all the right words to say, he summed it up this way, "Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!" (2 Corinthians 9:15).

So, at this Thanksgiving let's follow the counsel of the Psalmist: "Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever . . . Give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds . . . Give thanks to the LORD because of his righteousness and sing praise to the name of the LORD Most High . . . Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name" (Psalm 107:1, 8; 7:17; 100:4).

On a personal note, I give thanks to the Lord for all of you! For this wonderful church called the Assemblies of God that is lifting up the name of Jesus all over the world. I thank the Lord for our pastors and people, for our ministers and missionaries, for national Assemblies of God churches in over 200 lands that faithfully proclaim the Gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit. I'm grateful for the vast army of children and young people in our Fellowship who love the Lord; for all the senior citizens who have laid strong foundations through their prayers, labor, and love. I'm grateful for our young adults and those passing through the middle years of family and career. I'm grateful for the multiplied thousands of our Assemblies of God people who give time, talent, and finance to serve the cause of Jesus Christ. I'm grateful that the Gospel is being preached in word and deed to the poor, that sick are being healed, and that those bound are being set free. Truly, the Lord is doing a remarkable work in this day through His Church, and I thank Him with all my heart. I know you do as well.

May the Lord richly bless each of you! We give thanks with grateful hearts!